

EMERALD CITY

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Introduction

Well well, what do you know, back in California. How did I manage that? A combination of a very cheap fare from BA and meeting #500 of the Bay Area Science Fiction Association. I could hardly miss that, now could I? Happy Birthday, BASFA!

I guess I should have done something vaguely celebratory, like reviewing a whole bunch of books set in San Francisco. But I haven't. This is just an ordinary issue. A bit of Australian fantasy, a bit of a rant, and a first look at the BBC's new fantasy series based on Meyvyn Peake's *Gormenghast*. Also in this issue a first look at possibilities for this year's Hugo nominations. I'll probably return to this again next issue as there are a few books I think might be good bets that I want to read, but this issue should serve to get you started on thinking about your own nominations.

Talking of Hugos, if you are reading this in Australia and thinking that Worldcon has gone away for another decade, stop! If you had a membership in Aussiecon Three, you are entitled to nominate in this year's Hugos. You won't get sent a ballot, because Chicon is not obliged to do so and probably doesn't have an A3 membership list, but you can vote. Check out the Chicon 2000 web site (<http://www.chicon.org>) for more details, or email me.

Return to Elita

Back in issue #48 I reviewed books by two female Australian fantasy writers. Both were the first part of a trilogy. In this issue I finally get round to reading a bit more of these series.

First up is the second part of Kate Jacoby's Book of Elita trilogy. This one is called *Voice of the Demon*, and I can assure you that the Voice in question lives up to its billing. Sadly, whilst the book is pleasantly readable, it doesn't really move on from the first volume. Oh, the plot moves, and there is a nicely dramatic ending, but in terms of adding to the drama, the mystery, the sense of the numinous, all this stuff that you expect from good fantasy, it doesn't go anywhere at all.

I think that part of the problem is the characters. I hate them, almost unreservedly. They all seem to be unspeakably proud and place their honour before anything else in the universe, especially before people that they are profess to care for. Maybe mediaeval Scottish noblemen behaved like that. Come to think of it, quite probably they did. But it doesn't make them nice people to read about. It also leads to the sort of tiresome plot devices that you find in other British fiction about honour-crazed individuals.

For example, do you recognise this one? Character A announces that he will perform some foolhardy action for the good of character B. B is either unaware of this, or begs A to desist. A goes ahead anyway, the whole thing is a complete disaster, and A is either badly wounded or killed. Everyone then blames B who is consumed with guilt.

Or try this. Character A tells character B some significant piece of information about character C of which C is unaware. B tells A that it would destroy C if he ever found out and swears A to secrecy. C finds out anyway and swears undying hatred for A for not telling him.

The point is that as you are reading the book you can see exactly what is going to happen, and you can see that most of the characters know, but you are expected to believe that they all go along with it because their honour, no their pride, demands that they do so. And you end up feeling that they are all a bunch of idiots who deserve everything that they get. I'm sure that there are lots of people out there who like this sort of stuff. Indeed I suspect that much of the historical and romance fiction in the world sells on the basis of it. Me, I'm afraid I just find it irritating.

The other problem I have with these books is that they really are not fantasy at all. What they are is alternate history in which some of the characters happen to have skills in a weapon called magic.

I suppose I'd better explain that. Fantasy, at least as the likes of Lord Dunsanay, Tolkien, Charles De Lint or Neil Gaiman would recognise it, has to have some sort of sense of the mythical about it. There's no mystery about the magic in *Elita*. There are spells, but they are presented as psychic powers that the characters study scientifically. There is a church, but it is about as religious as the present day Church of England. It is as if the books are science fiction with horses instead of spaceships and swords instead of light sabres.

Personally I blame Gary Gygax for all this. By reducing spell casting to a set of rules and encouraging players of *Dungeons and Dragons* to exploit those rules in the same way that they might the rules of a board game, he has raised a generation for whom magic is no longer magical. I think it is all very sad.

Anyway, so much for volume 2. Look, there are probably thousands of people out there who love this sort of thing. What is done is done well, it just isn't for me. The next part of the saga is out in the spring. I will be buying it, because there is something left to be resolved. I rather like the idea of the good wizards having a powerful magical weapon but not knowing whether it is on their side or if it has evil plans of its own. But I do hope that it doesn't end happily ever after. The characters are far too selfish and stupid and they don't deserve a happy ending.

The Voice of the Demon - Kate Jacoby - Gollancz - hardcover

Turning on Axis

Quite a few Australians came out of Aussiecon Three covered in glory. The folks in charge of the Hugo ceremony are the obvious candidates, but one you might not be aware of is Sara Douglass. Sara, as I mentioned in issue #48, has sold huge quantities of books in Australia. The first trilogy was published in the UK last year to singular lack of success, in

all probability because the publishers went with the same dreadful covers that blighted the Australian editions. You can get away with bad artwork if you are being heavily promoted as local talent, but on the other side of the world that let out isn't available.

Anyway, shortly after A3 *Locus* announced that Tor had bought Sara's entire back catalogue and would be publishing them in the US. I already knew that I could recommend *Threshold* to my American readers, but what about the rest?

When I reviewed *Battleaxe* my reaction was pretty much the same as it was to the first Kate Jacoby book. It was formulaic modern fantasy, it was predictable, yes it was fairly well written, but it was unexciting. It did nothing new, or even anything adventurous.

Having read the subsequent volumes, *Enchanter* and *Starman*, I beg to revise my diagnosis. In *Enchanter* Douglass takes most of your expectations from *Battleaxe* and throws them out of the window. By the end of the second book you are starting to wonder whether Axis is really a hero at all, and whether or not you still like him. By the end of *Starman* the expected ending occurs and the Prophecy is fulfilled, but along the way one or two strange and disturbing things have happened. Readers of traditional fantasy who started out on *Battleaxe* expecting an unblemished happy ending will be seriously upset.

There are places too where Sara gets the fantasy bits right. The character of the Moon Goddess is particularly good. She is clearly inspired by Artemis the Huntress and could have sprung fully clothed from an Elizabeth Hand book. I particularly like way that a beautiful flower appears by magic over the corpses of everyone she kills.

On the other hand she then goes and spoils all this good work by going for the same "magic is really science" stuff that pervades Jacoby's work. Moon is a real goddess, but the rest of the Star Gods are more like a bunch of Californian hippies. Powerful magicians they may be, but Gods they most certainly are not. As for the discovery of a modern road tunnel beneath the mountains, or the suggestion that nuclear energy was used to power one of the magical weapons, oh dear.

Douglass clearly intends an environmental subtext to the series. We are aware right from the start that one of the bad guys is the Plough God who has persuaded mankind to chop down trees and generally be beastly to animals. But this is by no means a soppy, cute-furry-animal environmentalism. Douglass's deer people, for example, for all their professed pacifism, have religious practices that would have the Aztecs nodding in approval. Nature is red in tooth and claw, and Sara understands this well.

So too for the humans. Axis comes in for some particularly unpleasant treatment from the author and ends up having to do some horrific things, mainly to people who are close to him. It is all well planned too. He doesn't choose to do stupid things to protect his honour, he is put in situations where it is impossible for him to behave honourably towards everyone. I'm not entirely sure how he comes out of the end of it sane. Certainly the poor guy ends up saying "No!" almost as often as Thomas Covenant.

All of which is good stuff. There is just one flaw. Whilst Douglass's heroes are clearly shown to have a dark side, no similar blurring is allowed for the bad guys. The Skraelings (her orcs) are slaughtered in their thousands: men, women, children, even babes in arms (and eggs). Towards the end of the series the "good guys" unleash what is probably the fantasy equivalent of a neutron bomb on them. Nobody cares.

Right back at the beginning of the series, we see a young woman, cast out by her people, give birth and die in the snow. The baby boy is rescued by passing strangers. That boy grows up to become the prime villain of the series, Gorgrael the Destroyer, and the

creatures who rescued and nurtured him were Skraelings. They showed kindness, they clearly have feelings. I think they deserved better than they got, and I'd like to hear their side of the story.

Douglass has written one other fantasy trilogy that I think is currently only available in Australia. Looks like I shall have to go back to get it.

Enchanter - Sara Douglass - Voyager - softcover

Starman - Sara Douglass - Voyager - softcover

Martian Manifesto

What is it about Mars that causes otherwise sane and rational men to descend to writing drivel? Not long ago we had Kim Stanley Robinson's mind-numbingly turgid Martian trilogy in which he seemed to feel compelled to reprint every piece of research data he had found about Mars verbatim and lectured his readers at every available opportunity. Now Brian Aldiss and Roger Penrose, both of whom ought to know better, have produced their own vision of a Martian utopia, *White Mars*. It is, blessedly, only about a sixth of the length of Robinson's magnum opus, but sadly it makes considerably less than one sixth of the sense.

The objective is laudable enough. Like Robinson, not to mention so many New World colonists before him, Aldiss and Penrose wish to use the fresh start provided by virgin territory to establish the parameters for a utopian society. Like Robinson again, but unlike the Pilgrim Fathers, they can't actually get to Mars to try things out, so they have produced a science fiction novel telling the story of how they think that the colony will develop. The set-up is good as well. The Martians become stranded when the Earth economy collapses meaning that no further space flights can take place. They are truly on their own. So far, so good: from there on it is largely downhill.

An important stage of the book is the section early on where a public meeting is held to discuss what facets of life on Earth the colonists wish to discard. This is not an easy question, as their resident philosopher, Tom Jefferies, points out. They cannot ask for things like an end to disease or hunger, because such things may be beyond the meagre resources of the colony. Nor should they ask for an end to poverty, as that would require defining what it meant to be "poor", though they could, and did, ask for an end in inequality of wealth. They were not allowed to ask for an end to Jerry Springer (or the 21st century equivalent thereof), but had instead to define what it was about human society that allowed shows like Springer's to become popular. It is an interesting question, and it is well worth looking in detail at the answers to which Jefferies guides his fellows.

I should warn you here that much of the discussion in the book is deliberately obfuscated by the use of philosophical jargon. When I first read it I was prepared to allow that this might be an attempt to represent Jefferies character. He is, after all, supposed to be a professional philosopher. Having read the rest of the book I revised my diagnosis and decided that it was just another example of pomposity on behalf of the authors.

The first item that Jefferies raises is described as Mistaken Historicity. This is defined as the view that mankind is progressing inexorably towards a global culture. The authors claim that this is both untrue and unnecessary because, so they claim, the theory that cultural differences cause wars is no longer true. I beg your pardon? Leaving aside the obvious changes in cultures being caused by global media access, have these people been reading the news at all over the past decade? Which planet are they living on? Sure all wars are, at root, caused by economics, but it is cultural difference that generally provides the excuse for one group of people to try to appropriate the resources enjoyed by another group.

The trouble is that the authors have confused two entirely separate issues. First of all there is the question of historicism itself, that is the idea that human society is evolving towards some pre-defined goal. Marx's concept of the rise of the proletariat is the most famous and clearly explained example of this idea, and is well dealt with in Maureen McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang*. Another example could be the Victorian idea of Scientific Progress. Even some Millennialists argued that mankind would become more saintly as the Apocalypse approached.

Now it is certainly fair to say that historicism is misguided. It is a model of human development, and as such is at best as good as Newton's Laws of Motion, and at worst merely the equivalent of the geocentric view of the motion of the heavens. It is probably also true to say that there are some people around who believe that total elimination of cultural differences is the only way to obtain world peace, and thus such a development is therefore necessary and inevitable. It is quite wrong to confuse the two issues.

The meme that the authors, through Jefferies, should have been attacking is the idea that one form of culture is naturally superior to others. I agree wholeheartedly that cultural diversity is desirable. It enriches society and contributes to social evolution. (Diversity is, of course, essential to evolution.) But cultural diversity does cause suspicion, fear and eventually conflict. What needs to happen in the world is for people to accept ways of living other than their own as equally valid.

Thankfully we can see this happening in the microcosm in things such as the American concept of "The Holidays" which embraces Hanukkah, Ramadan and Kwanzaa as well as Christmas, or in the increasing acceptance of homosexuality. On the other hand we can also see the opposite happening in the wide variety of ethnically-based conflicts around the world, and in the rampant homophobia currently being promulgated by the Catholic Church in Scotland. You win some, you lose some, but hopefully we are still moving forward.

Onwards then to item two on Jefferies' list which he calls Transcendics. What he means by this is the notion that mankind is the only important thing in the universe and that everything else is there for our benefit. This is perhaps a laudable aim, but it is hard to see it coming to fruition unless humanity happens to run into another provably intelligent species. It is one thing to dispose of the ridiculous notion, common amongst Christian Fundamentalists, that if we wipe out all of the fish in the sea then God will miraculously provide a new source of food for us. It is quite another to argue against people who say that as long as there is enough food to last their lifetimes it doesn't matter that there is nothing left for future generations. We should perhaps aim to reduce selfishness in stages, not all at once.

Item three is described as Market Domination, at which point your alarm bells should already be ringing. Most science fiction novels have the same sort of cavalier attitude towards economics that Flash Gordon films have to physics, complete with economic equivalents of faster than light drives, winged aliens who fly through space and Flash getting out of his space ship in flight without a helmet. *White Mars* is no exception. The authors object to the fact that people today are obsessed with money and seem to believe that if there was no money, people would value things differently.

Now I will happily admit that there are some people for whom money has become an end in itself, but you can't get away from the fact that money is simply a means of measuring value. Aldiss and Penrose may feel that, for example, modern society undervalues the environment. If so they are given plenty of opportunity to do something about it by giving money to environmental charities, by paying more for environmentally friendly goods, or by choosing to walk instead of using their cars. The vast majority of people, however, do none of these things. Removing money will not make them care any more about their fellow beings, they will simply find some other way of expressing their selfishness.

The authors make several attempts to "prove" that money is not necessary. Early on, for example, they claim that some people clung to a credit system based on the expected return of the Earth economy, but that this gradually withered away, proving that it was not necessary. It proves nothing of the sort. Any currency system is dependent on the faith of the users that the symbol of value (i.e. the money) can be converted into items of actual value (goods, etc.). As time went by, and the Martians had less and less faith that Earth would rescue them, of course an Earth-based currency would fail.

The lack of understanding of the authors is perfectly illustrated later in the book when the Martian colonists decide that, having disposed of money and property, it will be necessary to find some other means of incentivising people. So they start paying people in larger living space and house plants instead! Yes sir, that meal you at will cost you two poinsettias and an African violet.

We get a little bit back on track with item four. Jefferies calls this Popular Subscription, but he doesn't mean anything to do with magazines. The idea here is well encapsulated by a quote from Samuel Johnson (the Martians seem to spend most of their time quoting famous writers from Socrates and Plato onwards). Johnson apparently said that the greatest part of humankind has no reason for their opinions other than that they are in fashion. He had a point. Thinking for yourself is hard work, and people don't like doing it. This is a particular problem these days when even the BBC has given up any pretence of objective coverage of the news.

It would be nice to say that the book goes on to illustrate how the colonists take this message to heart and start doing some serious thinking. Unfortunately much of the time they are shown having ideas of their own they are portrayed as being stupid and selfish in order to "prove" that all opposition to the authors' utopian plan is misguided. I also noticed that on several occasions Jefferies deems it necessary to restrict public access to important news items, which just goes to show what he really thought about letting people think for themselves.

Finally, as I noted earlier, the Martians vote to put an end to inequality of wealth. As they have no money and no property this is not so difficult. But of course the whole thing is a

cheat. The colony is seriously short of resources and only by sharing what they have and rationing are they able to survive in the short term. If you create a powerful enough incentive to communal behaviour it stands a good chance of working.

Not that it works perfectly. There is, for example, some vague passing reference to rotation of work, presumably so that unpleasant jobs are fairly distributed, but it is never made plain how this works. Nor does it seem to apply to all. Some colonists, by virtue of specific talents, seem to be allowed to concentrate on particular careers such as being a musician or a playwright. Others are co-opted into government, and the scientists have a separate and seemingly privileged society of their own.

A more realistic example of what a Martian colony would be like is given by Maureen McHugh in *China Mountain Zhang*. There the leaders of the colony make sure that all of the really unpleasant jobs are given to the people with the lowest social status and least influence. That makes the leaders very popular with the rest of the colony and ensures that they keep getting elected. In *White Mars* anyone with such Machiavellian political tendencies telegraphs the fact by frothing at the mouth and declaring their wish to be dictator, thus ensuring that nothing bad happens to the authors' plan.

I keep coming back to the fact that the book is a cheat, on many levels. The more obvious stuff is where all of the opposition to the outcome the authors want is portrayed as coming from crazed idiots. For example, it turns out to be possible that there is sufficient transport and fuel available for at least some colonists to return to Earth. None of the respectable members of the colony realise this, so presumably it takes a bit of working out. But the malcontents who were smart enough to hit on the idea are apparently too stupid to check where Mars is in relation to Earth, or work out if they have sufficient fuel, until the point that they are about to steal the space craft. This then allows them to have a big row amongst themselves and prove what evil and stupid people they are. Only by making the bad guys wear striped t-shirts and little eye masks and carry bags marked "swag" over their shoulders could the authors have made things more obvious.

But the really big cheat is in the set-up of the society in the first place. All of the colonists were pre-selected on Earth for their intelligence and commitment to working for the good of society. In other words they were pre-selected to be just the sort of folk who might be able to make the authors idealised society work. There is no discussion as to how the same system might apply to the rather more diverse society back on Earth. Instead, as if by magic, the people of Earth, having viewed video of Martian life, agree to transform their own society too, and it all works perfectly.

Then there is the size of the colony. Amateur political theorists are forever pointing to small-scale societies and bemoaning the fact that today's vast nations can't be as well governed. There is a very good reason for this. It is a damn sight easier to run a small society where most people know each other and the effects of individual actions are easily seen and understood. In a much bigger population, where specialisation is more common, anonymity is easier to obtain, and government is removed from day to day contact with the population, things are not so simple.

Of course small-scale societies have problems of their own. For example, they tend to be far less tolerant of different lifestyles. Here at least *White Mars* seems to have got it right, although the matter isn't discussed, it just comes through in the writing. For a supposed 21st century utopia, the book is remarkably full of 19th century prejudices.

Take racism for example. For the most part the Martian population is admirably multi-ethnic, but there are significant exceptions. When a black man complains to Jefferies of being discriminated against he is shown to be a pathetic whinger who is using the excuse of racism to cover up his own dishonesty, laziness, and lack of ability. Only when he overcomes these faults does he become an accepted member of society. The authors' message for blacks in our society is quite clear.

The book also has a number of major female characters, some of whom play a significant role in the development of Martian society. But the writing itself reeks of what might be termed "dirty old man syndrome". The authors, it seems, are the sort of men who would say, "of course I am not sexist, but I see nothing wrong in pinching the bottom of a tasty piece of skirt if it happens to walk by".

My third example in this area is the least pleasant of the lot. One murder takes place in the book. The victim, of course, happens to be one of the few blacks in the colony, but the murderer comes in for some assassination of the character variety. In order to "prove" what a nasty person he is, the authors take pains to point out that he is a transvestite. There is no other mention of sexual deviance anywhere in the book.

Have I finished? No. I could go on for twice as long about things in the book that made me angry, or made me despair at the dishonesty and stupidity of the authors. But you are probably bored stiff by now. So I shall not go on about how, despite their lack of resources, the colonists all agree on the wisdom of undertaking massively expensive experiments in particle physics. Nor shall I go on about the wild theorising on the nature of consciousness that makes part of the book sound more like a New Age manual on crystal dowsing than science fiction. And I shall not say a word about how AstroTurf does not need planting and does not grow.

The trouble is that there are lots of promising SF authors in Britain, most of whom could have produced a far better book than this. Instead we get publishers wasting their money on this poorly argued rhetoric which will only serve to confirm the opinion of most of the British book-reading public that SF is a load of childish nonsense. I've spent three months in Britain. Whilst I've been there, all sorts of good SF has been published in the US. This is the only significant SF book that has been published in Britain in that time. Hopeless.

White Mars - Brian Aldiss and Roger Penrose - Little, Brown & Co. - hardcover

Gothic Grotesque

In the annals of British fantasy literature there are two great trilogies. One, of course, is *Lord of the Rings*. The other is considerably less well known, and considerably less comfortable. In some ways Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* might be seen as an anti-*LotR*. Where Tolkien portrayed an idyllic image of a fantasy middle-class rural Shire menaced by the dark, industrial, working-class legions of Mordor, Peake instead portrays a decadent, crumbling aristocracy that thoroughly deserves to be brought down by those condemned by birth to serve it. Whereas Tolkien's heroes are reluctant champions of good prepared to sacrifice their lives to triumph over evil, Peake's Steerpike is an ambitious anti-hero, determined at

first to win his way out of the kitchens, but consumed and later corrupted by the opulent world into which he escapes. No wonder *LotR* is more popular.

The other reason for *Gormenghast* being less in the limelight is that it can be a bit hard going. I'm not a great fan of long, rambling descriptive passages. Peake, on the other hand, revelled in them. Apparently there is one point where he spends half a page describing Lord Groan raising an eyebrow. I do own the books, and have tried reading them on a couple of occasions, but there has always been something more immediate to grab my attention.

But there is one sure positive for books that are long of description. They are tailor-made for film. *LotR*, for all that it rambles at times, has a heck of a lot of plot. How anyone in their right minds expects to condense it into a movie is beyond me. I suspect that a fair amount of *Gormenghast* will go missing as well, but a 4-hour TV mini-series has a lot of potential, especially for the visuals. Peake was a painter as well as a writer, and *Gormenghast* is nothing if not visual.

There has been a lot of interest in filming *Gormenghast* in the past. Sting, who is a huge fan and who desperately wanted to play Steerpike, was unable to get a project off the ground. Terry Gilliam also tried and failed. Much to my surprise, the BBC, who these days seem as much obsessed with "what will sell" as any fantasy publisher, have let someone have a go. This could turn out to be very good indeed. Only one of the four episodes has been broadcast as I write, but I was fairly impressed.

To start with the cast is excellent. Christopher Lee, who knew Peake well, is probably the best known of them, and is beautifully typecast as the butler, Flay. Those of you familiar with British television should also recognise the names of Warren Mitchell (Alf Garnett), Ian Richardson (Francis Urquhart), June Brown (Dot Cotton from *Eastenders*) and John Sessions (numerous comedy programmes). Spike Milligan, Eric Sykes and Stephen Fry all have minor parts. There's some serious quality here, and they seem to have had great fun playing the various gothic grotesque roles.

The central part of Steerpike was given to Jonathan Rhys Meyers, currently a very hot property after starring as the Bowie-like hero of the cult rock film, *Velvet Goldmine*. He manages the required combination of charm and menace perfectly. You may not know this young man yet, but I suspect he has a notable career ahead of him.

To some extent, however, the cast is not important. *Gormenghast* castle itself is a major player and for the most part the set designers have done a great job. The blue screen scenes are a bit shoddy, but where there are actual sets they look fabulous. None of your Doctor Who quarries here, people.

Where the show really shines, however, is in the clothes. People, this is costumer heaven. After all, the Groans are fabulously rich and decadent, and they dress like it. There should be some examples on the BBC web site (<http://www.bbc.co.uk>) now, though how long they will stay there is another matter. However, the marketing department has already produced an "Art of *Gormenghast*" book and is selling jewellery inspired by the show. I don't think that their confidence will be misplaced.

Plot? Oh yes, there is one. It is all very obvious, of course, and I suspect that one of the things that the book loses in the translation to screen is the initial sympathy that the reader might have for Steerpike. There isn't time for it to build before he turns bad. You'll also find that it has difficulty making up its mind whether it is horror or comedy, but then that is Peake's fault. But don't worry about the plot. Just sit down and enjoy the pictures.

So, when will it appear in the US? A Boston TV company is listed as a co-producer so there's a good chance that it won't take long. The big problem will be that it probably won't be regarded as suitable material for the major networks. Sci-Fi Channel and TNT are good bets, or failing that PBS. In the meantime, be nice to people with dual-format video recorders and to your friends in the UK. Australia? I guess the ABC will take it pretty quickly. Europe I'm not sure about, but the BBC has good distribution channels so you should not have to wait long.

Sorry? Did I mention a book? Yes, this is a book review magazine, so I'd better talk about one. *The Art of Gormenghast* is, on the face of it, one of those expensive coffee table things full of big colour pictures. Dip into it, on the other hand, and there is a lot there. The book is subtitled, "The making of a television fantasy", and that is a fair assessment. If you have any interest at all in set design, costuming or special effects you should enjoy this one.

I haven't had a chance to read it all the way through yet, but I stopped off to see Steve Davies and Giulia De Cesare on the way to California and Giulia and I spent some time oohing and ahing over the costumes section. Remember that Peake described everything in minute detail, and sketched it as well just to make certain that the audience could visualise the story. That leaves quite a challenge for the production crew, and they seem to have revelled in it.

The best thing of all, from a costumer point of view, is that like us, the BBC has no money. Yes, the clothes look incredibly opulent, but they staff were sent out to Brick Lane market with a budget of about £20 per costume. How did they do it? Well, the book doesn't give everything away, but there are some clues, and some great pictures.

The book is a bit expensive, at £15, but if you have any sort of interest in TV film or costuming, or indeed Peake and Gormenghast, I would recommend it.

The Art of Gormenghast - Estelle Daniel - Harper Collins - softcover

Ballot time

OK folks, it is Hugo time again. Ballots for Chicon 2000 are now out, and you have until March 31st to submit your votes. Get to it.

Looking back over the past year, two books seem to stand out. The most obvious is *Cryptonomicon* (Neal Stephenson), if only because it was such a massive mainstream best seller. I suspect that some people might claim that it is not SF. It is, after all, set in the past and the present, and does not feature any new technology. However, the way in which the book is written is very much an SF style. Technology is central to the plot, and Stephenson takes pains to explain how it all works. It is much more in the spirit of SF, as Hugo Gernsback would have understood it, than many past winners.

The other obvious candidate is *A Deepness in the Sky* (Vernor Vinge). This is classic SF: good science, good plot, really great new alien race. Vinge is a past winner, and I think he has a very good chance of making it two.

Looking back over my reviews of the past year, here are a few more suggestions. *Black Light* (Elizabeth Hand), *Conqueror's Child* (Suzy McKee Charnas), *Souls in the Great Machine* (Sean McMullen). There is also some promising stuff that I haven't yet read: new books from Joe Haldeman, Pat Murphy and Stephen Dedman. I'm hoping to get round to those for next issue.

NESFA always publishes a recommendation list around this time of year, and they have a few other suggestions. Lois McMaster Bujold is a regular winner. I don't much like military SF, so I won't be reading *A Civil Campaign*, but it will be a very strong contender. The latest Harry Potter book, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, also features strongly in their list.

On the short fiction side, Kim Newman's *Andy Warhol's Dracula* deserves a nomination in the Novella category. Neil Gaiman's *Sandman: The Dream Hunters* is Novelette sized. I hope to review it for the next issue, but I'm sure it will get in regardless of what I say.

Dramatic Presentation will be interesting because there is so little from the usual contenders. *B5* is finished and *Crusade* was a flop. Trek fans might just nominate the last episode of *DS9*, but it was full of mawkish sentimentality and is more deserving of the dustbin than a Hugo. The media folks are apparently pinning their hopes on *Buffy* this year, though it remains to be seen whether they can concentrate votes sufficiently to get an episode in. If anyone nominates *Farscape* I shall scream.

In film, of course, we have *The Phantom Menace*, which I doubt will have much of a following. *The Matrix* is likely to get steady support, but for a dark horse I'd go with *Galaxy Quest*. It sounds like it should be very funny, the cast is good, and it starts off in a science fiction convention. *Gormenghast* did not premier until January and so is not eligible, which is good because by next year most Americans should have had a chance to see it.

The fannish stuff will be mostly the same as always, although of course we shall be the poorer for the absence of Ian Gunn. For fanzine you can't go far wrong with *Plokta*, *File 770*, *Banana Wings* and *Ansible*. In the fan writer class I'd pick Mike Glyer, Bob Devney, that man Langford again, Mark Plummer and Terry Frost even though he has been rather quiet this year (hint, hint). For fan artist, I think it is time for the ladies. Freddie Baer should build on her nomination from last year, and Sue Mason should at last get the recognition she deserves (of which more later).

Oh, and if any of you are mad enough or generous enough, you could always vote for me. Remember that I missed nomination in the Best Fan Writer category by just three votes last year. One way or another, that is terrible. Something should be done.

Whilst still on the subject of the Hugos, there has been a minor controversy surrounding the ballot. The front page has a nice illustration of a scholarly looking dragon perched atop a pile of books. Many past Hugo winners are clearly visible, but right in the centre, and very obvious, is Bujold's *A Civil Campaign*. This is an appalling piece of bad judgement by Chicon. OK, so the book is 99.9% certain of being nominated anyway, and this is only the nomination stage. But for the seated Worldcon to be seen to be backing a specific book in its official Hugo publications is not on. I hope that Tom Veal has issued an apology to Lois who is probably mortified by the whole affair.

Still on the subject of voting, nominations are now closed for this year's TAFF race. I'm not exactly sure who the nominees are, but I do know that my good friend Sue Mason is

standing, and that is all I need to know. Sue has been providing artwork to fanzines and convention publications in the UK for years, and why she doesn't get nominated for a fan artist Hugo is beyond me. Furthermore, she is just the sort of person for whom fan funds were designed, in that it is unlikely she could ever afford a trip to the US without one.

If you would like to see some of Sue's work, the best thing to do is visit her on-line shop for her pyrogravure work at <http://www.plokta.com/woodlore>. After you have done so, please note that I can take orders and bring stuff back to the US on my next visit. And no, I do not get commission.

Footnote

OK, that's it for another issue. Next time: Haldeman, Dedman, Murphy and Gaiman, and if I can read fast enough, Wolfe and Gentle too. Until then, take care.

Ciao,

Love 'n' hugs,

Cheryl